LOOKING
January 23, 2005

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Psalm 27
John 1:29–42

"What are you looking for?"
John 1:38 (NRSV)

Everlasting God, in whom we live and move and have our being:
You have made us for yourself, so that our hearts
are restless until they rest in you.
Give us purity of heart and strength of purpose,
that no selfish passion may hinder us from knowing your will,
no weakness keep us from doing it;
that in your light we may see light clearly,
and in your service find perfect freedom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Book of Common Worship
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Startle us, O God, with your truth.
We come here looking for hope and meaning, looking for you.
As we look, find us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Garrison Keillor said on his monologue last evening that the sturdy Lutherans of Lake Wobegon go to church on wintry, snowy mornings in January, after Christmas, just to show that they can. Lutherans go to church on a Sunday morning like this one just to show that they will endure. There are some Presbyterians in that number, obviously, for which I am thankful.

In a reflective moment, in a recent book, Garrison Keillor said,

> I tell stories on the radio about Lake Wobegon and its God-fearing, egalitarian inhabitants, and though I find a grandeur in this, I feel that, at 61, I am still in search of what I was looking for when I was 18. What I really want is a long conversation with Grandpa and Grandma Denham who came over from Glasgow in 1906 with their six kids . . . and settled in a big frame house on Longfellow Avenue.

> Grandpa was a railroad clerk who wore black hightop shoes and white shirts with silk armbands and spoke with a Scottish burr, so “girls” came out “gettles.” He never drove a car or attended a movie or read a novel. I want to know why they came here, what they were looking for—the truth, not a children’s fable—and if I have found it, maybe I can stop looking. (*Homegrown Democrat*, p. 203)

Keillor’s genius, to which every writer, every communicator, every preacher aspires, is to speak deeply to the human spirit with simple words and ideas and suggestions. I want what he wants: that conversation with grandparents who are no longer here. Why don’t we have these conversations when we can? My grandparents had fascinating stories to tell, and I was too preoccupied to listen until it was too late.

But what strikes me even more and speaks to my spirit is the sense that looking for something is indigenous to us. It is what we do, all our lives—at 18 and 41 and 61 and beyond. What strikes me is that, in a sense, looking, looking for something, is what it means to be human. A good conversation with his grandparents is what he wants, Keillor said, but at the end “the truth,” and when he found that, he could stop looking.

One day, not long after his baptism by John in the River Jordan, at the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus and John the Baptist—his cousin actually—meet again. It’s an odd little story. The Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, tells these stories differently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John puts an intriguing twist in here and there, a twist that makes us think. The other three tell it straight: Jesus sees potential disciples, tells them to drop what they are doing and follow him, and they do just that. Here Jesus is walking by; John the Baptist is standing there with two of his followers. John says, “Look,” (“Behold,” the older translation put it, but it means “Look”) “there goes the Lamb of God.” What a peculiar thing to say. What does that mean? God’s lamb, a small, weak, vulnerable little lamb? Whatever it means or does not mean to us, John’s two friends turn around and start to follow Jesus. And instead of saying “Follow me,” Jesus asks them a question: “What are you looking for?” And instead of giving him an answer, like “We’re looking for the meaning of life,” they ask him, “Where are you staying, Rabbi?”—which sounds suspiciously like they’re angling for an invitation to lunch. That’s essentially what they get. “Come and see,” he says, and they go with him and spend the day there, and at the end, one of them, Andrew, finds his brother Simon and tells him the most astonishing thing: “We just found the Messiah,” which is a way of saying, “We just found the truth.” And he persuades Simon to come and see, and he does, and Jesus renames him Peter, and the rest is history. The Christian enterprise begins.

Some quick observations. Faith starts not with a creed or a theological argument or a liturgical act but with an invitation to lunch and a conversation, a relationship. Evangelism, the sharing of truth, happens here not by preaching, compelling intellectual argument, but with an act of hospitality, “Come and see.” Were you as sad as I was to read in the paper last week that some Christian aid groups are transporting Hindu children miles away from their villages to give them food and also to share Bibles and Christian materials away from government officials and the press. And that some Muslim victims of the tsunami in Sri Lanka and Indonesia were reluctant to accept food and aid from Christian relief groups because they had learned that Christian aid is often the prelude to proselytizing? That’s not right. Evangelism as bullying doesn’t work anymore, isn’t appropriate, and it’s not an authentic witness. We are called to witness to our faith by our hospitality, with no strings attached, no conditions, no secondary agenda. You’re not supposed to use kindness as a way to convert, make saying a prayer the condition for giving a sandwich. You are supposed to just give the sandwich. “Come and see” that’s enough. We don’t have to do more than that.

And the reason, I think, is that “come and see” is, in a real way, the answer to the question Jesus asks, “What are you looking for?”

It is the right question. It is the basic question: What are you looking for?

What many answer to the question is “happiness.” What do I really want? What do I want more than a million dollars or perfect health or to go to heaven when I die? Happiness, now. The answer used to be “heaven.” Back when life was shorter and harder, heaven sounded like a great idea. John Calvin had an argument with himself about the subject. Christians ought to focus on eternal life with God, he said, and yet they can’t seem to stop thinking about their lives now. “Even though nearly all people want to appear to be striving after immortality,” Calvin wrote, “if you examine the plans, the deeds, the efforts of anyone, then you will find nothing else but earth” (see George Stroup, *Before God,* p. 130).

It is not easy, maybe not possible, maybe not appropriate, to try to convince people that their current state of happiness or unhappiness is not important. “The pursuit of happiness” is one of the unalienable rights written into our Declaration of Independence.

What are you looking for? A lot of people still answer simply, “Happiness.”

Time magazine last week presented a lengthy special feature “The Science of Happiness.” The editors noted that while something like 78 percent of us say we’re basically happy, there’s evidence of creeping dissatisfaction. “Why else are so many of us flocking to therapists, scarfing Prozac? Why do

so many reach midlife with a surprising sense of emptiness? In a society as wealthy and privileged as the U.S.'s, what, after all, does it take to find real satisfaction in life?"

That is the basis of a whole new field of serious scientific inquiry called Happiness Science. University of Pennsylvania psychologist and former president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, says that psychology should be focusing not simply on helping people cope with unhappiness but on "what makes human beings flourish and experience happiness. Instead of helping people get from minus five to zero, we should be helping them get from zero to plus five."

Seligman and his team have identified what makes human beings happy, and the reasons are overwhelmingly relational: other people. And at the very top of the list, the single most efficient producers of happiness are, and I can attest to this, grandchildren. Now, not everybody has grandchildren, but there is something deeply satisfying about relationships, human relationships; close, personal relationships, science knows, are related to happiness.

The research team has developed techniques to increase happiness:

1. Keep a gratitude journal. Write three blessings every day, three things that went well. We obsess about things that go wrong. So write three things that went well.

2. Do gratitude exercises: the scientists know that expressing gratitude not only will make you feel good, it actually raises your energy level and relieves pain and fatigue.

3. Acts of altruism. Do five kind acts a week and it will boost your spirit.

4. Make a gratitude visit. Write a note to someone for whom you are grateful and then hand deliver it and read it to them.

Interestingly, a gratitude visit, the researchers concluded, is the "the single most effective way to turbo charge your joy."

One thing that doesn't work is money. Once you have your basic needs met and can pay basic bills, incremental amounts of income, while nice, do not produce commensurate amounts of happiness, nothing nearly as dramatic as gratitude and relationships.

The feature included irresistible vignettes on the topic:

Charles Schultz, originator of “Peanuts”: “Happiness is a warm puppy.”

Ernest Hemmingway: “Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know.”

Ingrid Bergman: “Happiness is good health and bad memory.”

Joan Rivers: “Happiness, at my age, is breathing.”

And the article turns to religion. There is, everyone knows, although scientists have often found it awkward, a connection between religion and happiness. Now science, instead of dismissing, is evaluating. Why are religious people happier? The answer seems to be that religion, for many, provides social and spiritual support, a caring community, hospitality, a place to be—that is, many of the things people say they need to be happy.

Now at this point, this sermon could turn trivial and self-serving: “Put your hand on the radio and you’ll be healed! Send us your check for $100 and you’ll be repaid tenfold! Join our church and you’ll be happy!” There is no quid pro quo here. There are techniques, things to do, that for many people produce happiness. That text however, “What are you looking for?” forces us to refocus on the question.

I’m reminded of something the poet Rilke said in his famous advice to a young poet: “Questions. Live your questions. Love your questions.”

“What are you looking for?” is the basic question. Presbyterian theologian George Stroup writes,

> The issue . . . is not finally whether one believes, but, as the Bible recognizes, what one loves most fervently and what the heart yearns for as its final happiness. . . . There is a great deal at stake in the question of what finally will satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.” (*Before God*, pp. 137–138)

One of the most intriguing ideas I know, an idea I have come to love, is that God is the source of the basic question we ask, the idea that God has created us to look and seek and search.

God has created us, someone noted, with a “God-sized hole in our hearts” that nothing but God can fill.

> “Thou hast made us for thyself, so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Saint Augustine, said that 16 centuries ago. (A version of it is on the bulletin cover, in case you want to clip it for your refrigerator door.) The longing we experience, the emptiness, the incompleteness, the looking for something, is built into us by God.

Thomas Aquinas, centuries later, said it again in an essay on desire, including the erotic: the basic human desire is for God.

That is what we're looking for—for God, for truth, for relationship with that which is ultimate, for some sense that my life matters to God and in some way fits into a pattern God knows.

Sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof has studied and probed our own generation and concludes that the generalization everyone was talking about a while ago—that young urban adults, the proverbial yuppie generation, was the "Me Generation," characterized by greed, acquisitiveness, a "New Narcissism," whose final goal was to consume and acquire and whose final mantra was the bumper sticker "The One Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins"—Roof concludes that the analysis wasn't accurate at all. Rather, we are, all of us, a Generation of Seekers.

He writes, "There is widespread ferment today that reaches deep within our lives. Religious and spiritual themes are surfacing in a rich variety of ways. Many who dropped out of churches years ago are shopping for a congregation. . . . We are reaching out to commit ourselves to something of importance, longing for more stable anchors for our lives."

We live precariously in a world very different from anything in memory. The backdrop to the elegant presidential inauguration, with its hopeful optimism, is the reality of a world whose volatility and danger is more palpable and threatening than ever and the realities of insurrections and suicide bombers and global terrorism. In the meantime, we live in a culture that measures us by the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the schools we attended, the size of our homes, a world in which a sudden downturn in the market, an unfavorable personnel review, a "no" to a college application, the wrong lab report, the end of a relationship, can be a devastating blow and a threat to everything that has meaning and hope for us.

So yes, indeed, there is not a one of us who, in some way or another, is not looking for something.

So let's return to our odd little story:

> Two men standing with another, John the Baptist, compelling preacher, religious leader, Jesus walks by.

> “Look,” John says. “Look, the Lamb of God. He’s what we’re all looking for.”
>
> The men leave John and start to follow Jesus.
>
> “What are you looking for?” Jesus asks. They respond, “Where are you staying?” “Come and see,” he says.
>
> They go with him and spend the day.

Later, Andrew, one of the two, brings his brother Peter. Whatever happened that day changed Andrew forever and Peter too—and, through them, the history of the world.

And so I have a simple conclusion and proposal. I conclude and propose to you that what we are all looking for, no matter who we are or how old we are and no matter what we do for a living and how much money we have—I conclude and propose that we are all, in some way or another, looking for God, looking for a place to be, where we are welcome and at home, looking for someone to follow, something big and important enough to commit our lives to.

The psalmist wrote, “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after, to live in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life” (Psalm 24:4). We are looking for a place to be, where we are welcome and at home, and we are looking for someone to follow.

Sometimes the evidence is so simple. Last summer, our Summer Day Program, which provides several weeks of recreation and fun and learning and safety and security to 100 or so inner-city kids tried a creative new program with Starbucks called a poetry slam. As part of it, youngsters were asked to think about and write their very favorite word, the best, most fun word they could think of, write it down on a piece of paper and the leader would show them how their favorite word could become a poem. The leaders assumed that the youngsters, from Cabrini Green and Henry Horner Homes, would choose words like *cool* or *dude* or *Big Mac* or *Bulls* or *Michael.* The word most of them chose, to the leaders’ great surprise, was *“love.”*

What are you, I, all of us looking for? Well, that, for one thing. And when all is said and done that means Him: the one who showed us what love looks like, what love does, the one who showed us that God is love, the Lamb of God is who we are looking for, the one who gives us a place to be and a person to follow all our lives, and a cause big enough to live for and work for and serve for and love for and die for. Jesus Christ—all praise to him.

Dear God, in so many ways, for so many years, we have been looking. And in our hearts, we have always known it is you we look for. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Amen.